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Irene* is a great colleague. A senior manager in a large consulting firm, she pitches in when the workload gets heavy, covers for people when they're sick, and stays late when needed, which is often.

She's also a leader, serving on boards and raising money at charity auctions. She tries to be home for her kids at dinner time, but often works into the night after they've gone to sleep. That is, on nights when she's not at a business dinner.

But if you catch her in a moment of honesty, you'll find out that she doesn't feel so great. In fact, she's exhausted.

Irene can't say no. And because she can't say no, she's spending her very limited time and already taxed energy on other people's priorities, while her own priorities fall to the wayside. I have experienced the same thing myself. So, over time, I experimented with a number of ways to strengthen my no.

Here are the nine practices I shared with Irene to help her say a strategic no in order to create space in her life for a more intentional yes.

- **Know your no.** Identify what's important to you and acknowledge what's not. If you don't know where you want to spend your time, you won't know where you don't want to spend your time. Before you can say no with confidence, you have to be clear that you want to say no. All the other steps follow this one.

- **Be appreciative.** It's almost never an insult when people make requests of you. They're asking for your help because they trust you and they believe in your capabilities to help. So thank them for thinking of you or making the request/invitation. Don't worry; this doesn't need to lead to a yes.
- **Say no to the request, not the person.** You're not rejecting the person, just declining his invitation. So make that clear. Let him know what you respect about him — maybe you admire the work he's doing, or recognize his passion or generosity. Maybe you would love to meet for lunch. Don't fake this — even if you don't like the person making the request, simply being polite and kind will communicate that you aren't rejecting him.
- **Explain why.** The particulars of your reason for saying no make very little difference. But having a reason does. Maybe you're too busy. Maybe you don't feel like what they're asking you to do plays to your strengths. Be honest about why you're saying no.
- **Be as resolute as they are pushy.** Some people don't give up easily. That's their prerogative. But without violating any of the rules above, give yourself permission to be just as pushy as they are. They'll respect you for it. You can make light of it if you want ("I know you don't give up easily — but neither do I. I'm getting better at saying no.")
- **Practice.** Choose some easy, low-risk situations in which to practice saying no. Say no when a waiter offers you dessert. Say no when someone tries to sell you something on the street. Go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and say no out loud ten times. It sounds crazy, but building your no muscle helps.
- **Establish a pre-emptive no.** We all have certain people in our lives who tend to make repeated, sometimes burdensome requests of us. In those cases, it's better to say no before the request even comes in. Let that person know that you're hyper-focused on a couple of things in your life and trying to reduce your obligations in all other areas. If it's your boss who tends to make the requests, agree upfront with her about where you should be spending your time. Then, when the requests come in, you can refer to your earlier conversation.
- **Be prepared to miss out.** Some of us have a hard time saying no because we hate to miss an opportunity. And saying no always leads to a missed opportunity. But it's not just a missed opportunity; it's a tradeoff. Remind yourself that when you're saying no to the request, you are simultaneously saying yes to something you value more than the request. Both are opportunities. You're just choosing one over the other.
- **Gather your courage.** If you're someone who is used to saying yes, it will take courage to say no, especially if the person asking doesn't give up easily. You may feel like a bad friend. You might feel like you're letting someone down or not living up to expectations. Maybe you'll imagine that you'll be seen or talked about in a negative light. Those things might be the cost of reclaiming your life. You'll need courage to put up with them.

After Irene tried these practices she started working less and spending more time with her kids. She's still doing great work and she's still valued by her boss and co-workers, but they've noticed the difference too, she told me. And not all of it is positive.

They're respecting her boundaries — they don't even seem to resent her for them — but she's had to give up something she never knew was important to her: her sense of herself as someone who could do it all. It's been hard for her to feel as valued and necessary as she did when she always said yes.

“Would you rather go back to saying yes all the time?” I asked her.

She answered me with a very well-practiced “No.”

**Name and some details changed.*

Peter Bregman is the CEO of [Bregman Partners](#), a company that helps successful people become better leaders, create more effective teams, and inspire their organizations to produce great results. Best-selling author of *18 Minutes*, his most recent book is [Leading with Emotional Courage](#). He is also the host of the [Bregman Leadership Podcast](#). To identify your leadership gap, take Peter's [free assessment](#).
